Taming antagonism and the becoming-other of politics

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Taming antagonism and the becoming-other of politics

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To disentangle liberal democratic theory from its rationalism and orientation towards consensus, Chantal Mouffe recommends reviving Machiavelli's argument about the institutionalization of conflict. Democracy, she argues, needs to establish a vibrant public sphere in which collective identities can openly contend with each other in an adversarial left/right format. Such an institutionalization of conflict is easily imaginable in the form of, and well known from, parliamentary party politics. But is it extendable to those extra-parliamentary forms of politics that increasingly appear to supplement democratic parliamentarism? Does the 'becoming-other of politics' (Arditi 2003) suit or defy the institutionalization of conflict?

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In the opening pages of *On the Political* Mouffe (2005: 7) credits Machiavelli for having realized the ineradicability of conflictual relations in societal intercourse. In *The Return of the Political*, Mouffe (1993: 36) moreover affirms that Machiavelli (more precisely, the Machiavelli in Quentin Skinner's reading) pioneered a politico-philosophical tradition, which identifies the task in the institutionalization of this ineradicable conflict.

Machiavelli's political thought indeed includes an argument about the beneficial role that conflict can play in political life that is akin to Mouffe's agonistic model of democracy. In the *Discorsi* Machiavelli first affirms that a difference in the humours of citizens can be found in all political communities, which manifests in an unbridgeable division between the nobles and the commons. Though counterintuitive, Machiavelli goes on to claim, the conflicts that arise between these two groups are the very substance of which good laws are made, and the stability of the order is guaranteed:

> [G]ood examples arise from good education, good education from good laws, and good laws from those agitations ['tumulti'] that many people thought-lessly condemn. *Machiavelli, Discorsi I.4*

Of course, not any kind of conflict is conducive to improve social life. The point is to channel conflicts through political institutions:

> [T]here is nothing that makes a republic so stable and steady as organizing it in such a way that the variability of those humours that agitate the republic has a means of release that is instituted by the laws. *Machiavelli, Discorsi I.7*

When, however, a political order lacks suitable methods 'of giving vent, so to say, to their ambition,' when 'these humours have no legal form of release, they resort to illegal means that bring about the ruin of the whole republic' (ibid.).

An inquiry of the various philosophical differences and amendments that can be found in Mouffe's argument – such as the non-essentialist conception of collective identities, the nature of power relations, or the modifiability of hegemonic constellations – goes beyond the scope and interest of this paper. Instead, I shall focus on a question that is addressed by both authors, but not satisfactorily answered: the question of the proper institutionalization of conflictual relations.

Machiavelli primarily calls for granting the populace elected officials in public administration comparable to the Tribunes in Ancient Rome. Mouffe (1993: 5) stimulates our imagination by referring to the parliamentary party system. Parliamentary politics, it is suggested, tames the potentially lethal clash resulting from social division. At the same time, parliamentary politics is neither geared to a rational consensus, nor presupposes a shared identity that is more demanding than that which Mouffe (2005: 52) calls 'conflictual consensus'. Conflict is not displaced from the political system, just civilized. Ballots and speeches replace swords and daggers, and the counting of the votes transitorily ends the agonistic contest. There is room for debate as to whether the binary oppositional programming of two-party systems is preferable to multi-party systems. Yet there should be little controversy that by and large parliamentary forms of political contestation suit the agonistic model of democracy rather well.[*] Yet how about extra-parliamentary institutions? Do channels give a political outlet to agonistic pluralism through which policies, dissent, and alternatives are articulated and enacted outside the parliamentary setting?

To be sure, posing this question means neither to proclaim the end of the nation-state, nor to commit a self-defeating conceptual overstretch that sees politics always and everywhere. Suffice it to say that I consider the parliamentary system to be the principal, though not exclusive domain for the production and transformation of order. While absolutist regimes may have hoped to accomplish the centralization of politics in a single societal sub-system, parliamentary democracies always had more complex political topographies. Hence, in our political orders politics is allowed to

[*] Of course, the possibility of agonistic intercourse may be undermined by party-political centripetalism. Mouffe (1993: 5) accordingly points out that citizens are likely to resort to antagonistic means once parties fail to offer real alternatives. I shall bracket out the questions related to this argument, as the neglect to articulate agonistically opposed identities is a failure of political parties (and their theorists) rather than the political system.

take place also in certain informal and semi-formal settings of civil society and the economy. In one way or another do actors outside the circuit of parliamentary democracy impact upon the structuring of the possible field of actions of others, and in this sense entail 'government' (Foucault 1982: 207-9). Moreover, it appears not excessive to maintain that since the last third of the twentieth century or so we are witnessing an additional dissemination of the means and sites of political intervention, and that it is unlikely that this trend will soon be reversed (cf. Arditi 2003: 7). If so, the question concerning the compatibility of extra-parliamentary institutions with a theory of agonistic pluralism is relevant today, and might be of increasing importance in the future.

Now, Machiavelli was prepared to include informal or semi-formal politics into his model of agonistic pluralism. Apart from the disputes between Senate and Tribunes, he notes that the commons 'rushing tumultuously through the streets and closing their shops' (Discorsi I.4) – i.e. demonstrations and strikes – was good practice for staging conflict in Ancient Rome, and helped securing liberty. Such informal or semi-formal institutions, Machiavelli seems to have observed, were one of the commons' few channels for ventilating grievances. The nobles, for their part, did not need to do politics in this way. Either, they already were in power, and if they were not, they resorted to illegal means by attempting a coup d'état with the help of mercenaries.

However, our situation is clearly different. Today's 'nobles' – say, members of the corporate citizenry – apparently do not anymore consider themselves too good for engaging in informal and semi-formal politics, and arguably, they command far greater resources than non-corporate citizens. Corporate actors launch voluntary initiatives to set standards, legitimize and de-legitimize existing practices. They organize or participate in fora where problems are defined, issues framed, and agendas set. If some of the rumours about the Koch brothers' contribution to the formation of the Tea Party movement are not just another conspiracy theory, they might even have discovered for themselves (the organization of) demonstrations as a means to express dissent and mobilize support. At any rate, extra-parliamentary institutions provide channels for staging conflict that allow putting to use resources that are grossly unevenly distributed. An agonistic theory of democracy should have something to say about this, and it should go beyond an affirmation as to the relinquishment of violence and a commitment to a thin conflictual consensus. Put differently, I wonder whether agonistic theories comprise some kind of proviso that requires the clash of adversarial positions not only to be free, but also fair, i.e. by some measure procedurally regulated.

As far as I can see, the only concept in Mouffe's vocabulary that might serve to give orientation for the articulation of such a procedural proviso is the notion of the 'post-political' (Mouffe 2005: 48), which points to a situation where conflict is somehow displaced. So let's consider whether the displacement of conflict provides a principle

to expand upon our question. We could imagine a displacement of conflict in terms of a temporal or spatial non-coincidence of opposed interventions. By contrast to parliamentary proceedings, where adversarial positions clash at the same time in the same place, demonstrations, for instance, are typically a delayed reaction to the consolidation of a dominant will. The events of the World Economic Forum and the World Social Forum, to give a second example, take place simultaneously yet in different locations. Not just a pragmatic matter, the choice of diverging venues may be an essential part of such kinds of political intervention, as the determination of where a political position is asserted may symbolically contribute to imparting the respective ideological message. But apparently this does not lead us very far. Conflict might be temporally or spatially structured, but it is not repressed.

What about the possibility of a moralistic or technocratic displacement of conflict? Such a displacement of conflict, after all, Mouffe sees at work in the writings of theorists such as Ulrich Beck or Anthony Giddens, as well as in the discourses conducted by politicians such as Tony Blair and George W. Bush. I agree that social and political theorists should be more sensible to deciphering political disagreement. Also, I believe that political practitioners should avoid to de-legitimize opposition. Yet this is a matter of political culture, not the institutional setup of democracy. It is not intuitively clear how an institution could affect whether particular interventions within it are made in the name of good/bad, right/wrong, or left/right. Moreover, proclamations that there is no (viable) alternative to one's proposed course of action belong to the basic repertoire of rhetorical strategy.

To present a last idea, we might ponder over whether the problem with at least some extra-parliamentary institutions consists in a tendency to displace conflict by functional differentiation. Non-legislative modes of governance such as corporate self-regulation initiatives, for instance, promise gains in efficiency compared to traditional legislation. Among other factors, these gains are made possible, insofar as they are made possible, by fragmenting a complex issue into technicalities and managing them in isolation, whereas the whole political controversy arises precisely from the organic connection of the fragments in question. Insofar as the reduction of political complexity is structurally inbuilt in certain institutions, the category of the 'displacement of conflict' might indeed offer an original starting point for a critique of today's extra-parliamentary institutional practice. (After all, agonistic pluralism requires the possibility of contention about real alternatives.)

Nevertheless, even if certain extra-parliamentary institutions lend themselves more to the manifestation of monologic political wills, aggregatively considered the sum of individual interventions – parliamentary or not – still appears to clash as adversarial positions within the same discursive space. At the end of the day, the real virtue of parliamentary politics could stem not from its capacity to enable an open and direct clash of adversarial positions, and not even from the possibility to contend about the

character of the social order in a holistic way. Instead, it might be due to all those procedural requirements that aim at guaranteeing every citizen a 'fair value of political liberty' (Rawls 1999: 197).

In sum, I feel that an agonistic theory of democracy needs to be more demanding than requesting a vibrant public sphere characterized by non-violent contestation. A democratic theory, even if it does not cherish the ideal of reasonable solutions, ought to provide an understanding, some kind of threshold of which institutional setups are permissible and which not. Otherwise, there is the risk that the argument concerning the institutionalization of conflict takes the turn one can occasionally observe in Machiavelli's thought, namely that liberties, good laws, and legal channels for expressing dissent are valuable primarily as means to the end of political stability, rather than as ends in themselves. The institutionalization of conflict might serve ordinary people primarily, as Machiavelli's wording anyway suggests, as a means to blow off steam, and thus release rather than exert pressure.

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